

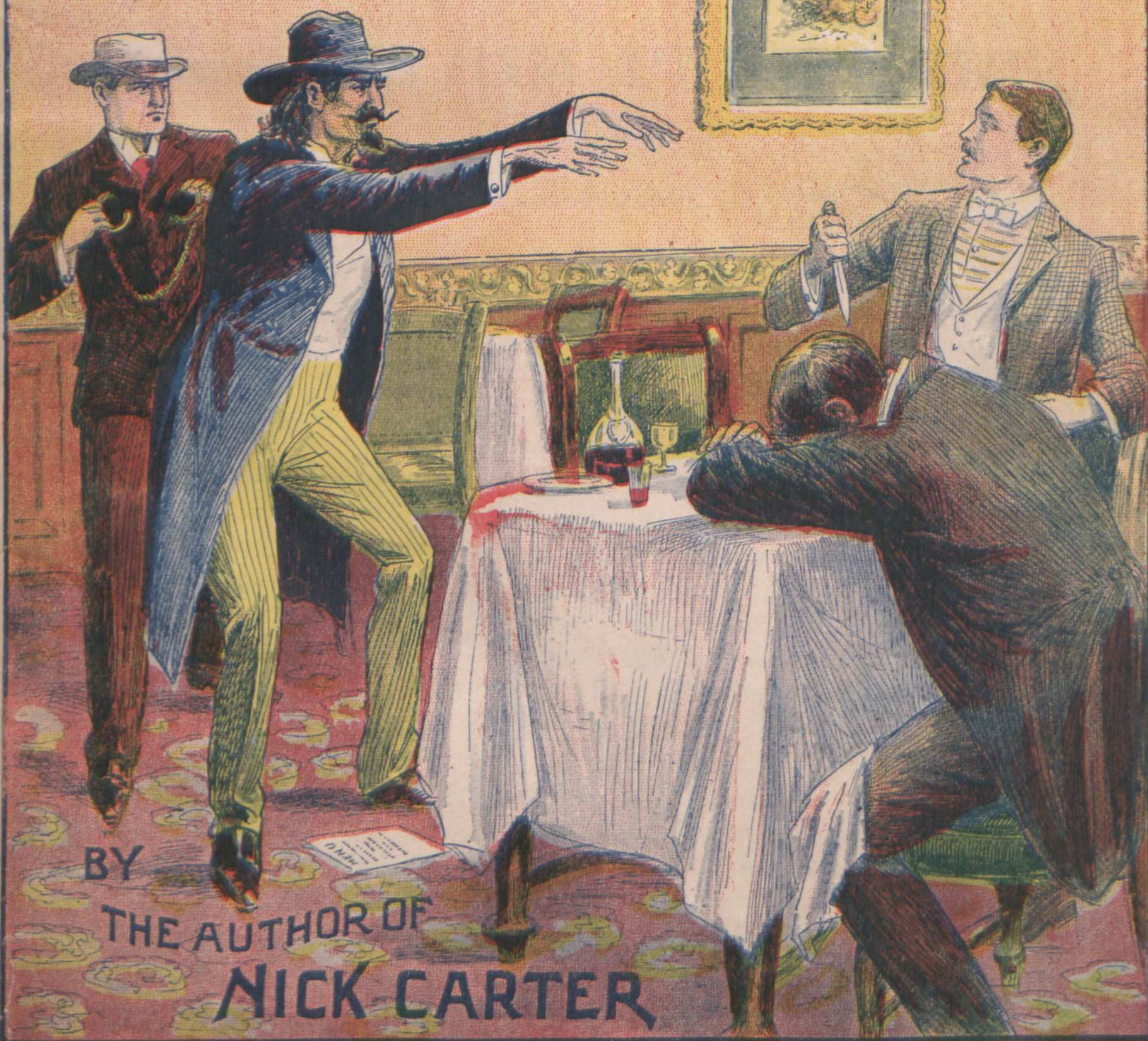
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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No. 142.

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NICK CARTER MEETS A WIZARD AND SHOWS HIM A NEW TRICK



NICK WOULD NOT PERMIT THE HYPNOTIST TO GO ANY FURTHER.

A new story, written specially for the Nick Carter Weekly, and will not appear in any other number.

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Nick Carter Meets a Wizard

AND

SHOWS HIM A NEW TRICK

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

AT THE UNION DEPOT.

"You see that man?"

"I see him!"

"Mark him well!"

"I have done so."

"Be sure you would know him again."

"I know him already."

"Hah! Then who is he?"

"Nick Carter."

Two men were standing just outside of one of the street windows of the Union Depot in Chicago.

One was pointing, the other was looking—at Nick Carter.

The famous New York detective was not aware of this interested inspection.

In the first place, the men were standing where deep outside shadow and darkness particularly shut in the wall angle where they lurked.

In the next place the expert secret ser-

vice man was intent solely on watching the crowds that filed up the broad staircase—passengers from arriving trains.

Nick had telegraphed to New York for Chick, and his assistant was due to arrive on the fast mail, scheduled on the bulletin blackboard as "On time."

At no moment did the two men hovering about the secluded corner bring their faces within the radius of the strong electric light of the waiting-room chandeliers.

The first speaker, having pointed out the detective, drew back from the window a further foot or two.

The man to whom he spoke followed his example, but still faced the window.

Then the conversation was resumed.

"Yes," said the former, "you have guessed—it is Nick Carter."

"Oh, I know," affirmed his companion.

"Had business with the famous Nick, eh?"

"Once."

"Ah!"

"But merely a narrow graze—with a crowd."

"Then he knows you."

"Not at all. Wouldn't matter if he did."

"It would not matter in the present case."

"I am relieved."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't fancy a personal tussle with Nick Carter."

"Who would!"

"And whatever you are plotting, let me stipulate one thing."

"Stipulate it."

"I am not disposed to take a great risk."

"Afraid?"

"It would take a thunderburst to move that man!"

"I don't want to move him."

"That's good. What do you want to do?"

"I want you to personate him."

The other gave a careless, confident laugh.

"That's better; that's all right," he said. "It's in my line."

"Quite."

"He's a strong character, and therefore not difficult to copy."

"You think so?"

"Call the make-up part done—I add Nick Carter to my repertoire!"

"Very well."

"And I am ready for orders."

"I don't give them."

"Who does?"

"My master."

"You mean your employer?"

"No—I used the word advisedly."

"He must be a strong man to have you regard him as your master."

"Strong expresses it—so you must fancy there is to be no trifling. He leaves

me to pick out the man. I have done it—you are the man."

"I see."

"I have your address—you know what you are to do."

"Vaguely."

"Keep that man in mind—profile, dress, manner."

"It's my business—that kind of thing."

"When you are told how you are to utilize that memory, be prepared."

"When is this thing to come off?"

"Soon."

"How soon?"

"Within two days."

"That suits!"

"And it won't take a quarter of an hour."

"Better and better!"

"You get paid well, you disappear and—forget."

"Anything, so I am well paid."

"You will receive a fifty-dollar bill."

"Why! that is as good as a week's engagement at the Lyric."

"For a simple single turn, but—Ah! what's that?"

"What?"

"That head bobbing about inside there!"

The speaker had chanced to turn toward the window in the opposite side of the angle.

From a bench right up against this window a form had arisen, and it was hastily crossing toward the door.

"Quick!" spoke the man who had admitted that he was controlled by a master.

"Shadowed?" uttered the other.

"No—at the worst we have only been spotted. But, whether or not, it is time to hustle!"

The two men disappeared across the pavement and slid into obscurity.

The form vanished from the angle on the opposite side of the room.

Nick Carter meantime watched the

string of people file from the staircase to bus, cab and trolley car.

"No, Chick," he soliloquized. "Singular!"

Nick consulted his watch and a time table.

Chick might have missed the fast mail; however, an express was due in two hours.

Nick, calculating to be on hand when this arrived, strolled toward the main exit.

Chick suddenly met him, and the veteran expressed mild surprise in a speedy glance.

The face of his assistant was flushed, and Chick drew his hand across his brow, as if to remove perspiration gathered there.

His eyes, too, expressed a certain "professional fire" that brought a keen, responsive gleam of inquiry into those of Nick.

"Oh! then you really arrived, by the fast mail?" asked the detective.

"Of course."

"I didn't see you."

"Made a short cut—up the suburban staircase."

"To get ahead of the crowds."

"Yes, and reach you quickly."

"You missed the connection," declared Nick.

"Thereby hangs a tale!"

"Ah—you surely arrived by train, Chick?" pursued the detective, quizzically.

"Why, of course."

"I didn't know but that you had been hoofing it?" observed Nick, suggestively, "judging from your flustered appearance."

"Oh, I have been hustling."

"Since your arrival!"

"Let me tell you something."

"Well?"

"You are spotted."

Nick looked amused.

"Who by?"

"Two men."

"Explain."

Chick took his "chief's" arm.

Guide, pilot and demonstrator, he went over the recent developments in which he had taken a part by proceeding back to the scene of their occurrence.

"I heard your name," narrated Chick, describing the two lurkers, "and I slid to that bench under the window."

"Ah! an open window," chimed in Nick.

"And a barred window—unfortunately. Those four rods, to prevent children from climbing up and falling out, baffled a prompt pounce on those two plotters."

"I see."

"There is no street door here—the main entrance was congested by a crowd."

"You ran down to the train floor."

"And up the street steps."

"To find?"

"Nobody—nothing."

"So far as the two men were concerned—I understand."

"They had taken a cab."

"You found that out?"

"Promptly—each a different cab."

"Ah!"

"Going in different directions."

"I see."

"The man who agreed to personate Nick Carter gave no specific order to the driver."

"Didn't, eh?"

"Just said: 'South side.'"

"And the other?"

"My informant——"

"Who is he?"

"A third cabman."

"Proceed."

He overheard the man who is working for 'a master' give a direction.

"What was it?"

"Whisky Point road and Grand avenue."

"Far, and—queer."

"Isn't it?"

"But definite. Now you come."

Nick abruptly became the leader where he had temporarily elected to follow.

He hurried Chick out onto the sidewalk.

"Where's your cabman informant?" questioned Nick.

"That's he," said Chick, pointing.

"He knows the cab we're after, so he will fit in exactly right," observed Nick.

The cabman recognized Chick, read the detective's evident haste, ran to his cab and opened its door.

"You'll do!" nodded Nick, approvingly.

"I'll try to!"

"Whiskey Point road and——"

"Grand avenue—I understand. You want to get there first, sir?"

"Can you do it?"

"I average two fines a month for reckless driving."

"You will do, I see!"

"You want that cab or the passenger?"

"Both."

"Trust me, sir!"

Nick felt that he was in the hands of one of those shrewd, ambitious fellows who size up fares just right, and expect to be paid for doing it.

"He will be discreet," said the detective, throwing himself back into an easy position among the cushions. "Now let us analyze affairs, Chick."

"You think this precious pair are worth running down?"

"What!" challenged Nick—"a fellow who proposed to steal a quarter of an hour of my existence!"

"That's so."

"And work the fifteen minutes for the best they can produce, probably."

Chick saw the point and became thoughtful.

It was indeed a serious suggestion—Nick Carter had the control over prison

bars and bank vault locks innumerable—was the custodian of secrets and powers representing great interests and individual welfare.

Nick and his assistants had been handling some rather important cases in Chicago—others were being worked at present.

For this purpose Chick had been sent for; Ida, the peerless "lady detective," was already on the spot.

There was no immediate urgency for their presence elsewhere on that particular evening, however, and Nick had a spare hour or two.

"I feel conscience-clear in running down an affair personally my own so far as matters have developed," he said to Chick.

"This fellow, who seems to be so ready at personation, must be some professional character demonstrator," suggested Chick.

"It looks that way," admitted the detective.

"He can be rounded up through inquiry among the professionals."

"Possibly."

"I didn't see the face of either man," went on Chick.

"But you would recognize their voices again?"

"Oh! yes—and the man we expect to anticipate at that distant terminus was certainly 'a master.'"

"Well?"

"That fellow didn't speak as if he were a servant."

"Ah?"

"No; rather like some fellow under the power of a devotee of the black art."

Nick expressed no opinion.

"A wizard."

"It's the nineteenth century, Chick!"

"I state an impression, that's all."

"I will keep it in mind."

Nick had called the locality they were heading for "far and queer."

The Whisky Point road was an old Indian trail at the extreme western limits of the city.

It had retained its original features despite the forward march of metropolitan progress.

It ran by stone quarries, railroad yards, and a generally desolate and uninhabited stretch, into busy, bustling Grand avenue—a sudden step from chaos into brilliancy.

The cab clattered and swung in a way that informed the observant detective that its driver was bound “to get there first!”

“Grand avenue,” announced Chick, peering toward a lamp-post that seemed to fly past them.

There came a sudden tap at the back of the driver’s seat.

“Attention!” ordered Nick, straightening up.

He leaned from the open window.

A square ahead a cab was leading the race.

Nick’s Jehu had nearly redeemed his promise; he spurted up.

Nick and Chick were borne forward more rapidly than ever.

Little did they realize that they were dashing into the vortex of one of the crack cases of Nick Carter’s busy experience.

Suddenly a startling sound was borne on the air.

It was caused by a crash, splintery and significant, and again the detective leaned through the open cab window.

“Chick!” he cried. “Jump out!”

Nick clicked the cab door handle on his side with the words.

His eyes were fixed ahead.

“Ah! a collision!” exclaimed his companion.

The cab ahead, going at a tremendous rate of speed, had run into a wagon.

It lay over on its side now—a complete wreck.

The wagon careened, nearly overturned, upset its driver, and with a frenzied snort the horse attached whirled down a side alley.

“A runaway,” supplemented Nick.

He was out on the step, holding to the swinging door now.

Suddenly he made a jump.

Intervening vehicles standing at the curb and a whizzing trolley car momentarily shut out the scene of collision from the detective’s view.

Nick could not fully understand a movement on the part of his companion.

The latter, with a word not intelligible amid the uproar, darted forward, but not for the natural scene of interest, the wreck.

Nick wondered, as Chick disappeared like a phantom between two buildings.

He himself kept straight on. He ran up to where the overturned cab lay crushed and broken on the ground.

Its driver, his hand to his side, was just arising, pale and tottering.

Nick went to the wrecked cab and peered in.

“Where’s your fare?” he demanded, sharply.

“Oh! him?” muttered the driver—“he’s gone.”

“Gone—where? how?”

“He jumped.”

Nick discerned that this was possible without his having observed it, while the cab was describing its destructive spin.

“He piled into that wagon that caused all the trouble,” added the driver.

“Oh! he did?” nodded Nick.

The detective now understood the meaning of that strange side dash of his assistant.

The runaway wagon had carried away the man they were after. Chick had seen this, from his superior point of observation, and Chick was on the trail of the runaway wagon.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN IN THE SACK.

Nick was about to press for further information, but the cab driver reeled just then.

He fell on his side, insensible, and Nick had his hands full with his care alone.

By the time the detective had dragged the man out of danger of the hoofs of the prostrate, kicking horse, three precious minutes had slipped by.

Nick took the word of the cab driver as an explanation of the disappearance of his recent fare.

Chick's conduct seemed to corroborate the statement.

Then, too, as the detective mixed with the crowd which had gathered about the spot, he found several who had observed the spry jump of the man who had been in the cab.

"He made a run—I saw the wagon shoot down that alley," declared one witness.

"Was the man in it?" inquired Nick.

"The fellow clung to the tailboard as the wagon dashed on."

"Where is the driver of the wagon?" asked the detective.

"He's in that drug store," said a bystander, pointing.

"Oh! they carried him there."

"Gasping and fainting."

"Here's his hat," spoke a voice.

Nick took and pocketed a black slouch hat covered with mud and dirt.

He proceeded to the drug store. Its proprietor was urging the swarming mob about the doors and windows to disperse.

Nick pressed up to and past him.

"Where is your patient?" he inquired.

The detective noticed no evidence of the victim of a wreck in the appearance of two clerks and a man, the latter apparently a doctor.

"Oh! he's bolted," smiled the physician.

"Bolted, has he?" repeated Nick, vaguely.

"Like an arrow."

"When?"

"Just now. You see, he wasn't much hurt."

"No."

"Bruised, half stunned. A douche of camphor brought him to his feet and to the door in a flash."

"Started after his rig, did he?" said Nick, moving toward the street door.

"Not that way."

"Not this way?"

"No."

"What way, then?"

The doctor pointed to a side exit near the prescription counter.

"He got to the front," narrated one of the clerks, "gave a look, and dodged back."

"Dodged?" reiterated Nick.

"Just that, and bolted through the side door there."

Nick glided toward the same exit.

"Left his name, though," observed the doctor.

"His name?" interrogated the detective, rapidly.

"Mentioned it—for me to send my bill. Ha! ha!"

"What was it?"

"Nick Carter."

"I understand!" muttered Nick Carter himself.

The detective did—thoroughly.

There had been a suspicious aspect in the transit of the man in the cab to the runaway wagon.

Nick framed his theory with the rapidity of lightning.

The man in the cab had come to this remote locality purposely to meet the wagon with which the cab had accidentally collided.

He was interested in that wagon, and,

seeing its driver dismounted, he had essayed to regain control of the runaway rig.

The original driver, taken into the drug store, and there, recovering, had hurried to the street, likewise anxious for his vehicle.

He had seen Nick approach. He knew Nick. Nick's name, an ejaculation of amazement and alarm, had been forced from his lips.

Here was a lively nest of action, with much of coherency about it, and Nick plunged headlong into the swim.

But he could gain no trace of the wagon driver after his sudden dash through the side doorway of the drug store.

Nick returned to that point after a rapid reconnoissance of the neighborhood.

The wrecked cab had been moved out of the way of traffic, and the police patrol had cared for driver and horse.

Nick's cabman, with exemplary discipline and patience, was on his seat, ready for further orders.

He looked as if he would part with half his fee to get an inkling of the cause of the sensational occurrences of the past half hour.

Nick, however, simply nodded to him, and went back to the drug store.

He was confident that Chick would soon turn up with some information.

Nick hovered about the door, watching the street in both directions. He came out on the pavement as a wagon turned the next corner.

The presence of his assistant on the driver's seat convinced Nick that it was the vehicle he was looking for.

Nick advanced to meet Chick, who saw him, made a gesture of recognition, and drove up directly behind the waiting cab.

The horse was foam-flecked and panting; Chick looked grave rather than excited.

He maintained a seriousness which

Nick could not fail to study as he turned his face full upon him.

"Well, Chick?" inquired Nick.

"You see, I have the wagon."

"But not the man who led you to chase it?"

Chick shook his head in the negative.

"Why not?"

"I fancied the wagon more important."

"Ah!"

"I have found it true."

"So?"

"The fellow saw me coming down that alley. I had drawn my pistol, and it frightened him."

"What did he do?"

"Jumped on a shed roof not easily accessible for me. I guessed he had an interest in that wagon."

"I guessed that myself."

"We were both right."

"You interest me, Chick."

"I overtook it."

"And here you are!"

"And there it is!"

"It?"

Nick shot a glance where his assistant's finger significantly pointed.

"We have run down a queer subject," observed Chick.

"Subject, eh?"

"A dead man."

"You don't tell me!"

"In a sack."

Nick's eyes opened wider.

"There's such a thing in this wagon?" he interrogated.

"Under that straw."

Nick came close to the side of the vehicle.

He inserted his hand among a mass of straw.

Lightly as he disturbed this, he could make out coarse sacking.

Feeling, his fingers passed over the outline of a human form.

Experience informed Nick Carter that

a dead person filled the bag, half hidden in the straw.

Nick was used to this sort of thing, but he became very serious.

A crime, a mystery, a tragedy, had come under his notice in a most peculiar way.

Nick reflected for a moment; Chick watched his face penetratingly.

The detective went over to the cabman, paid him, took his number and address, and that also of his fellow Jehu, and dismissed him.

Nick got up on the seat beside his assistant.

"Drive on," he directed.

"Where?"

"To the morgue, of course."

"Yes—that's so," nodded Chick, slowly. "I suppose we've got to do it."

"Reluctant?"

"It's a great case!"

"Yes, it looks so, Chick."

"The police——"

"Oh! it will be so deep for them, they won't take it out of our hands."

"You drive."

"Very well," nodded Nick.

"I'll watch."

"Who—what for?"

"Those two men. I miss my guess if they wouldn't give considerable to prevent our opening that bag—to prevent this subject from getting to the morgue."

"Naturally, I apprehend no attack on the public streets, though, Chick."

Chick, however, kept up a watchful survey of the route, back and ahead.

The nearest morgue was at a large hospital near a sub-precinct police station.

Nick stopped at the latter place first.

A word to the lieutenant placed matters just as the detective wished them to remain for the present.

Two officers were detailed to accompany Nick. The wagon was driven to the morgue building, and these men and its

sleepy-eyed keeper carried the bag and its ghastly contents to a display slab.

Nick lit the gas, and Chick and himself began their investigation.

The bag was ripped down its centre.

The body was that of a man not less than sixty years of age.

His face was thin, worn with disease, and he had been dead apparently not more than twenty-four hours.

"No external marks of violence," reported Nick, after a superficial examination.

"Then it isn't——" began Chick.

"Murder? There may be poison, Chick."

"Oh, yes."

"We will hear what official authority says about that."

"I see. When?"

"At once. We must know our premises at the start."

Nick made a thorough examination of the clothing of the deceased.

Not a scrap of paper was found—there were no identifying marks whatever on the clothing of the dead man.

Nick returned to the police station with Chick and the officers.

"I want an official examination of that body at once," he explained to the lieutenant.

"You can't reach the coroner to-night."

"I do not wish to—there is a department surgeon, though."

"Yes."

"Dr. Maury."

The lieutenant bowed.

"I know him slightly—there could be no objection to his looking over the body and giving a professional opinion as to the cause of death?"

"None whatever. Shall I summon him?"

"If you will. Just mention my name, please, and say that haste is imperative."

The lieutenant went the telephone. In the course of a few minutes he in-

formed the detective that Dr. Maury had been apprized of the case and would soon be ready to go to the morgue.

The lieutenant, the surgeon, Nick and Chick proceeded thither an hour later in company.

The surgeon made a thorough examination.

"Off the track this time, Carter!" he announced definitely at the end of fifteen minutes.

"What do you mean?" questioned Nick.

"You won't find murder in the case of this subject."

"No?"

"Positively no."

"A post-mortem——"

"Will carry out my assertion—I risk my professional reputation on that."

"I have my opinion on this case," here submitted the police lieutenant.

"Have you?" questioned Nick.

"Body snatchers—that's evident."

"You think so?"

"Doesn't it look that way?"

Nick said nothing.

"One fact is certain," observed the surgeon.

Nick inclined his head attentively.

"This man died a natural death."

"From——"

"Some form of lung trouble—we can ascertain positively in the morning."

"Oh, yes," nodded Nick. "Lieutenant, will you summon the coroner early?"

"On his first round."

"I shall be here."

Nick thanked the surgeon and parted cordially from the lieutenant.

"What now?" questioned Chick, as they found themselves rid of outside company.

"Our hotel now, Chick," replied the detective.

"Going to let things rest a few hours?"

"We will have to. I have confidence in

Maury, but his decision is not final with me."

"He may be right," commented Chick; "and if so, there is no crime."

"You must admit an amazing amount of mystery about this affair, though, Chick?"

"Yes."

"The body-snatching theory is ridiculous."

"You say that?"

"And maintain it—that body has never seen the inside of a casket."

"Why not?"

"It was barely cold."

"Ah!"

"It was in nowise dressed for death. And, another thing——"

"Yes?" murmured Chick, expectantly.

"A heavy white beard had been removed from the face."

"After the man was dead?"

"Positively."

"Then——"

"We shall know more in the morning," predicted Nick Carter, sententiously.

CHAPTER III.

IDENTIFIED.

It was eight o'clock the next morning when Nick Carter and his assistant presented themselves at the police station.

The lieutenant greeted them with an effusiveness that was rather patronizing, Nick fancied.

"Has the coroner arrived yet?" inquired the detective.

"Oh, bless you! yes," answered the officer.

"We have kept him waiting? Sorry! You fancied nine would be his earliest."

"He came at seven!"

"Oh, he did?" muttered Nick, beginning to understand the lieutenant's show of importance.

"Unexpectedly. So——"

"You proceeded without me?"

"We had to—the coroner had a great many cases to attend to, and came here first purposely to oblige me and you."

"Accommodating," criticized Nick, dryly.

"So, everything is decided," beamed the police officer, briskly.

"Is it?" questioned Nick, with mildness.

"Yes—we held the inquest."

"And found?"

"Just as the surgeon—as I said, last night."

"Natural death?"

"Positively. Some lung trouble—the coroner gives it a long name."

"No trace of violence?"

"Not a bit of it!"

"Or poison?"

"None!"

Nick closed his lips grimly; the lieutenant dismissed the affair as if pigeon-holed, and began fussing over the papers on his desk.

He was naturally glad that a new murder mystery had not occurred in his district.

He was gladder still that it had not fallen to the fortune of an outsider—even great Nick Carter—to discover the same.

Nick was silent for a moment or two.

"Let me say a word, lieutenant," he observed, finally. "While this remarkable occurrence of a stray wagon with an unburied body may not conceal a positive crime, I shall be compelled to follow this matter up."

"Why, my dear Mr. Carter?"

"Because I am not satisfied."

The lieutenant laughed somewhat derisively.

"Not satisfied?" he repeated.

"No."

"In what way?"

"The persons who originally had this body in charge must be found."

"Find them—I hope you will—I wish

we could, although I don't see what especial charge we can bring against them? By this time they have got into hiding and covered their trail."

"Have you tried to trace the owner of the wagon?"

"N-no."

"Have you taken any steps toward ascertaining the identity of the dead person?"

"Not necessary."

"How?"

"Not at all."

"You amaze me!"

"The coroner's investigation settled that."

Nick looked dubious.

"Settled it?"

"Certainly."

"In what way?"

"The marks on the one cuff worn by the dead man."

"The dead man wore no cuff!" sharply interrupted the detective.

"Oh! but he did."

"You are mistaken."

"Marked 'M. D.'"

Nick gave Chick a significant look—he changed his tone.

"Marked 'M. D.', eh?" he repeated softly.

"Yes—Martin Delaney."

"Oh! you even know the decedent's name?"

"Surely."

"How is that?"

"The letters—the papers."

"What letters—what papers?"

"Found on the deceased."

"Where on the deceased?"

"In his various pockets."

"When?"

"This morning."

"By whom?"

"The coroner."

Nick Carter gave his assistant another glance.

"Lieutenant," he said, "I would like to have another look at that body."

"In order to satisfy yourself about those clews of identification?"

"That is it."

"You needn't take the trouble of going to the morgue."

"Indeed?"

"For I brought them here."

"Can I inspect—these—clews?"

"Certainly."

The lieutenant opened a drawer.

"There you are," he said.

The officer tossed on his desk a little package, apparently containing letters.

Beside them he dropped a cuff considerably worn and frayed.

Some one called him into the outer room at that moment.

Nick and Chick were left to themselves—to an unwitnessed inspection of the lieutenant's "clews."

Their eyes met.

"Well!" exclaimed Nick, "this case is assuming some decidedly peculiar features."

"I should say so!"

"You understand, Chick?"

"I do."

"We shall have this case to ourselves."

"All to ourselves!"

"Since we were here last night, since that body was taken to the morgue, and we made our initial investigation, some one has slipped past that sleepy watchman."

"Exactly."

"And planted these fictitious marks of identification."

"Sure!"

"Which makes our course clear."

"Plain as day!"

"Take a look, Chick."

The twain went through the lieutenant's "clews" in short order.

The cuff had two initials marked upon it "M. D." in blue ink.

A battered brass button bearing the

monogram "D" held the cuff ends together.

"I couldn't have overlooked that," observed Nick.

"You didn't overlook it," asserted Chick, with promptness, "because it wasn't there."

The letters were also written in blue ink.

They were mainly from "Ellen" to "Martin."

They were brief, but they covered the four years' history of a woman separated from a husband who was tramping from place to place about the country, in search of work. Nick ran them through; then he smiled.

"Remarkably fresh ink for letters four years old," he observed.

"And no envelopes, and the paper where that suspicious smudge doesn't cover it is clean and white as if written upon yesterday," added the detective's assistant.

The lieutenant reappeared.

"Well?" he said, rubbing his hands together in a self-satisfied way—"pretty convincing, Mr. Carter?"

"Conclusive!" declared Nick.

"You see, there's a dozen different theories as to the fellows who had the body."

"I see."

"They may have been friends—he may have died suddenly somewhere on their hands, and they were taking him to his widow."

"Surely," nodded Nick.

"She is the writer of these letters," went on the lieutenant. "It was a stroke of luck finding her."

"What do you say?" demanded Nick.

"Yes, we found her," added the officer proudly. "I call that quick action."

"How did you find her?"

"Well, you see—the letters are all dated Chicago."

"I see that," admitted Nick.

"And we have some old officers on the force. I questioned the squad before they went out. A roundsman—Colins—knew a woman, a grass widow, he called her —"

"Named Mrs. Martin Delaney?"

"That was it. He hunted her up. She came back with him to the station here."

"When?"

"She left not ten minutes before you arrived."

"Well?"

"She identified the dead man."

"As her husband?"

"As her missing, roving husband. We had quite a time with her—she got so hysterical. She claimed the body."

"She brought some neighbors to assist in the identification, I suppose?" suggested Nick.

"Why, no—her present neighbors never knew her husband."

"Indeed!"

"They lived together last in Omaha."

"I see."

"So the coroner has ordered the body turned over to her."

"At once?"

"Yes—she said she would send an undertaker forthwith."

"Come, Chick," said Nick Carter. "One more favor, lieutenant."

"Yes?"

"Will you give me the address of this Mrs. Martin Delaney?"

"Surely."

The lieutenant penciled the required address, and handed the slip of paper to Nick.

He bowed his visitors out politely, and then hurried to the squad room to tell his captain how he had proved himself "smarter than Nick Carter!"

The detective left the station to repair to the morgue room.

"Find out how sleepy that old fixture, the watchman, was last night," Nick directed his assistant.

He himself passed into the room in which was the marble slab bearing the dead Martin Delaney.

Nick examined the apartment closely. The minute he discerned the two broad window apertures, never closed, and a few feet only from the ground, he realized how easily a surreptitious visitor could gain undetected entrance.

Nick next proceeded to give the body on the slab a thorough examination.

It had been disrobed during the coroner's examination—all except the shoes and stockings.

Nick found only one or two moles about the body—common to any person, and not likely to serve as identifying marks.

The detective's examination was thorough, however. He took off one shoe and stocking and viewed them critically, but found no guiding marks.

At that moment the watchman entered.

He held in his hand an open paper.

Nick divined what it was—an order for the body; and who the person following the watchman was—an undertaker.

Chick was waiting outside.

Nick took him with him to their hotel.

"Now, then," he announced, when they were comfortably seated, "to boil down the facts in the case."

Chick was animatedly attentive and interested.

"We have uncovered quite a mystery," declared the detective.

"A conspiracy?" hinted Chick.

"Whatever it is—crime. This body business is the central pivot. There is a scheme to personate me," proceeded Nick. "There was a scheme to use this body for something. They may or may not connect, but three men are concerned."

"The man who has 'a master?'"

"One."

"The man who has put Nick Carter in his repertoire."

"Two."

"And the 'master' in question."

"Who," declared Nick, "must be the man who drove that runaway wagon. Now we have had no fair sight of any of these persons, to know them again."

"Not I."

"We will assume the 'master,' the wagon driver, to be the most important personage of the trio," said Nick.

"Yes," assented Chick, emphatically.

"Reach him, and we find the director, the head centre of this mysterious enterprise."

"Surely the man without whose orders Number Two will not start in to impersonate you."

"That is true. Well, Chick, I have a clew to the identity of this mysterious Number Three."

"Ah!—good!"

"His hat."

Nick produced the muddy, dusty headgear casually handed him by the crowd about the scene of the runaway.

"He left that behind him, did he?" questioned Chick.

"He did, for he was bareheaded when he entered and left the drug store."

"So it is his hat."

"Unquestionably. If it were an ordinary hat, I would not waste a second's time on it," explained Nick.

"It is not such?"

"By no means."

"How is that?"

"Watch carefully."

Nick placed the hat on the table between them.

It in a way resembled the sugar loaf headgear worn by a clown.

Nick dented it in with his finger here and there, for it was unusually flexible.

Then he showed its inside; no dents corresponded with those on the exterior.

"A flexible exterior, a stiff interior," he explained.

"I see," nodded Chick.

"This interior has little pockets here and there."

"That is queer."

"The space between the two constructions would hold a great deal of stuff."

"Oh!"

"Do you begin to divine?"

"I think I do."

"Give it a name."

"That hat is the property of some man dealing in—the black art."

"Say—a wizard?"

"Yes, it belongs to a magician."

"Very well, Chick," said Nick, "you have your cue—find the owner of that hat."

"That is my share of the case."

"For the present."

Chick took the hat into his keeping, and Nick arose.

"As for myself," he observed, "I have other work to do. They are going to take the body of Martin Delaney to his widow's home."

"Yes—and I heard the undertaker say,"

volunteered Chick, "that they were going to have a wake to-night."

"Very well," declared Nick, with deliberation, "I shall be present at that wake."

"Good!" commented Chick, with enthusiasm and confidence—"between us both, it will be a hard thing if we don't run down before midnight——"

"The 'master?'"

"The 'master.'"

CHAPTER IV.

HIS OWN FUNERAL.

At noon that day a ministerial-looking person entered the humble domicile of the bereaved Mrs. Martin Delaney.

He claimed to come from "the Registrar of Vital Statistics."

He evaded mourning friends, and secured a private interview with the widow.

This sympathetic and sepulchral visitor was Nick Carter, made up to deceive his closest friend.

His official solemnity impressed Mrs. Delaney, and Nick got plausible answers to a good many questions regarding the deceased.

When he asked for pen and ink to make some "entries" in a pretentious blank book he carried, blue ink was furnished to him.

When he asked for a sheet of paper on which he might fill out "a certificate," Nick was given the best in the house—which was precisely the same as that upon which the missives at the police station had been written.

Nick knew from the start that this woman was taking part in an imposture.

Evidence concerning the same could not be stumbled upon, however, and Nick set at work methodically.

There were two things to accomplish: First, to unmask the widow's claim—next, to find out the people back of her.

This last was by far the more important and essential task of the two.

The registrar became a peddler by mid-afternoon, and circulated all about the neighborhood.

At dusk a third transition was indulged in.

Nick was a stray Celt; vaguely, "a friend of some friends" of Mrs. Delaney.

In the crush Nick passed muster and portals, and thereafter had the entree unchallenged.

Mrs. Delaney was on pretty firm ground. She had come originally from Omaha, and not one of her Chicago acquaintances personally knew the real Martin Delaney.

Nick observed that she had quite a sum of money; she displayed a roll of bank-notes several times during the day.

No one had called to see her except neighbors and friends, nor did she send a message to any person outside of that list.

Nick hoped that the evening would produce some disclosures in the direction of those who had employed her.

A specific reason for keeping the house under surveillance was that it might be part of the plan of the original plotters to repossess the body.

Its peculiar manipulation rather puzzled Nick—the motive for its manipulation was to him a mystery.

However, it seemed that the present anxiety of these schemers was to have the body accepted and “waked” as that of Mr. Martin Delaney.

Nick proposed to see the performance through, and later if it was intended to really bury it as such.

The wake proceeded in true Milesian fashion up to ten o'clock, and the humble cottage was the scene of ripe uproar and “enjoyment.”

The “festivities” were at their height, when the girl who “tended the door” came and whispered something into Mrs. Delaney’s ear.

Watchful Nick Carter had his shrewd senses all alert.

Mrs. Delaney had been gone barely a minute when a scream came from the front room of the house.

The guests pressed toward its door. Immediately, a sister of the hostess opened it, confronting the startled guests, and closed and locked it behind her.

She was pale and perturbed, but she made a bold front.

Nick detected that she was not only in the confidence of the widow, but that she had clear nerve.

“What is it?” was asked, curiously.

“Sure, only a call.”

“Who, now?”

“A friend of poor Martin. It overcame my sister—his pitiful cries of grief.”

Nick could overhear two excited voices in that front room. The sister was a shrewd one.

She drowned the excited voices with her own incessant clatter, and by getting the guests into a turbulent argument that soon created a babel.

Nick slipped out of the front door, suspicious and vigilant.

The windows of the room, where Mrs. Delaney was receiving her visitor were closed and shaded.

There were, besides, some people hanging about, and it would not do to be discovered eavesdropping.

Nick, therefore, secured a place of hiding whence he could command a view of the front entrance of the house.

During the next half hour that door was opened cautiously several times.

Mrs. Delaney peered out.

But the coast was not clear, and the operation was continued until a favorable opportunity was presented.

“Now—go!” fell upon Nick’s ears at last.

A man bolted down the steps, darting for the shadows of the yard and scaled a fence to the rear alley.

Nick looked him well over as he ran; he decided that he was of a far coarser mold than any one of the three men who had figured in the events of the evening previous.

Nick shadowed this man deliberately, however. Some lively suggestions were rife in the detective’s active mind.

The fugitive led a full mile chase, down alleys and across lots.

At last he ventured into more public view, but it was in a wretched side street.

He paused before a saloon, felt in his pockets, hesitated, entered.

Nick watched through the window. The man drank three glasses of brandy in rapid succession.

“Nerves shattered—bracing up,” commented Nick.

When the man came out he acted less suspiciously, and walked with a more confident poise.

He paused frequently, sometimes to indulge in a sombre reverie, sometimes to toss up his head excitedly.

Nick finally shadowed him down to a narrow river slip.

Here the fugitive fancied himself alone.

He took a roll of bills from his pocket, and standing near a lamp post, looked them over.

Then he glanced at the waters of the slip.

"Meditating suicide?" soliloquized Nick. "I think not."

The man suddenly lifted his hand.

Something he had just taken from his pocket he deliberately flung into the waters of the slip.

"That is significant!" declared Nick. "I have let this man go too far."

Nick rounded on him as he retraced his way to the main street.

From behind a lumber pile, as the fugitive passed, Nick raised his voice.

It was to pronounce, with the richest brogue:

"Martin!"

"Hah!"

The fugitive seemed shocked—he staggered as if a rock had been landed in the small of his back.

"Delaney!"

He shrank within himself, and his eyes expressed intense terror.

He turned round and round, fearfully scanning the vicinity for his challenger.

"Who—who is it?" he uttered hoarsely.

"Why! Martin Delay!" cried Nick, and sprang into view.

He ran at and up to the figure rooted like a statue.

"Who—who is it?" repeated the man.

"Who is it?" cried Nick, slapping the stranger's shoulders with effusiveness.

"Delaney, you villain, don't you know a friend?"

"S't!"

"Eh! what, man?"

"My name!"

"Isn't it yours?"

"Don't mention it!"

"Why not?"

"Who—who are you?" again stammered the man, staring fixedly and suspiciously at Nick.

"Who am I?"

"Yes."

"Don't you know me?"

"I don't."

"You don't remember in the old days —"

"Where?"

"In Omaha."

"Oh! you knew me there? All right. Come and have a drink with me. Then I must go. I've got to catch a train back for Omaha."

"When you have just arrived?"

"Who told you?"

"Ah, you deceiver! Don't I know where you've been?"

"Eh!"

"Why! at your own funeral, man!" said Nick Carter.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE RIVER SLIP.

The detective gave his companion another emphatic slap—it nearly toppled him over.

Gasping and ghastly, Delaney looked ready to sink to the earth with stupefaction and weakness.

"I—I must go," he faltered. "I don't know you—I don't remember you!"

"What does it matter," insisted Nick, "so long as I know you?"

Nick did not care to waste time on small game.

He read Delaney like a book, and handled him promptly.

The latter had dropped to the lumber pile, and sat there staring up at his tormentor in a stupid yet anxious way.

His mind drifted back to the detective's recent pertinent remark.

"My own funeral!" he muttered, as if Nick's intimation had struck him with full force for the first time.

"And your own wake!" observed Nick, familiarly.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I saw you at your house."

"Were you there?"

"I was."

"Did you follow me here?"

"I did."

"What for?"

"I'm a policeman, Delaney."

"You're a policeman!" gasped Delaney.

"And sorry to see you headed for trouble."

"What?"

"It's that way."

"It's none of my own seeking!" groaned Delaney.

"But you took the blood money."

"Eh!"

"It's in your pocket now."

"S'sh! She—she gave it to me."

"Of course she did!"

"You know all about it?"

"Pretty near."

"What am I going to do?"

"Well," advised Nick, "you can either call on me as a friend or as an officer of the law."

"How? how?" questioned Delaney with eagerness.

"Tell a straight story."

"About what?"

"The game your wife is playing."

"It's none of mine," declared Delaney.

"I happened to come home for the first time in four years."

"To-night."

"Yes, just now."

"To find yourself—dead?"

"My wife screamed and fainted. She said she was pretty near the gallows if things came out."

"But she prevailed on you——"

"She did!"

"To shut your eyes and go away?"

"As well you seem to know! What else could a fellow do?"

"She divided the blood money?"

Delaney shivered at that term.

"She gave me some of the money, yes."

"To return to Omaha?"

"That was it—and she was to come."

"When the funeral was over, I suppose?"

"N-no."

"When, then?"

"Later."

"How, later?"

"Next month. You see, with the little pile she got we could start a small business out there."

"I see," commented Nick; "but she was going to wait till next month, you say?"

"Yes."

"Why is she inclined to delay her departure?"

"Well, you understand——"

"The truth, Delaney! She intends to wait for more money?"

"Yes, that's it."

"From the same parties?"

Delaney nodded reluctantly.

"For the same crime?"

Delaney gulped at that ominous word.

Nick persuasively but firmly rested a hand on Delaney's trembling arm.

"Answer some questions," he commanded.

"I will."

"Your wife explained all about the dodge she was up to, I suppose?"

"I forced her."

"What did she say?"

"Well, a man came to her last night."

"Who was he?"

"She never saw him before."

"Has she since?"

"No, and will not again."

"How do you know that?"

"He told her so. He made no bones about anything. He was disguised about the face, and he told her so. He scared her and then he rattled her with his mysteriousness."

"Go on, Delaney."

"She consented to admit him when he told her he would give her a chance to make some money. This was the way he put it: He had become aware of her being a grass widow."

"How?"

"He didn't tell her, but he said she was just so fixed by circumstances that she would exactly suit his plans."

"Those plans——?"

"She was to write some letters, as if to me. These were to be put on a person at the morgue."

"Whom she was to identify as yourself?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"All she had to do was to shed a few tears, and bury the body as Martin Delaney."

"For how much?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"At first."

"Yes."

"And after?"

"Two hundred more."

"What was the duplicate amount for?"

"Why, the man said she was to do as he said. She agreed. If there came a hitch, a slip, she was to have the first money anyway. If there was none, and things

went smooth, and she kept her lips closed, thirty days from date a second fee of the same amount would be sent to her."

"How—by messenger?"

"No—he said by mail."

"You believe this story, Delaney?" questioned Nick.

"Sure!"

"There is no show of the man coming to see your wife again."

"Nor reason."

This looked plausible. Mrs. Delaney had merely yielded to a temptation to make some money—she was simply a cats-paw.

"Well, Delaney," observed Nick, "I am going to let you go—home."

"Home!" jerked out Delaney.

"Yes."

"But I can't go home!"

"But you must."

"No, sir! no, sir!"

"Or jail."

"Now then——"

"Your wife, too!"

"I told her no good would come of deceit!"

"And I told you I was a policeman. Duty is duty; but if you want me to stand a friend and shield you——"

"Yes, yes!"

"You must do just as I say."

"I will—I've got to! What is it?"

"You must go home and tell your wife that you won't go to Omaha till she goes with you."

"As you say—although the task is very unpleasant!"

"You must insist on staying in the house. You can be her long-lost brother, or something of that kind."

"If it will pass!"

"Let the funeral go on, only—don't bury the body."

"What shall we do with it?" questioned Delaney, beginning to shake with terror.

"Place it in the vault."

"Ah, yes—I see!"

"If the man who hired your wife appears or sends word——"

"He won't."

"If he does, go straight to that address, and present this card."

Nick gave Delaney a bit of pasteboard bearing the address of a professional

friend in Chicago in close touch and harmony with himself.

Delaney took and pocketed it.

"I am not to tell my wife about you, sir?" he queried.

"No—you are to watch her, to see that her representations are truthful."

"I understand."

"You will do this, and no trouble shall come to you."

"We can keep the money?"

"You can keep it."

Delaney got up, relieved, but as he faced homewards he looked quite anxious and dubious.

"Wait!" ordered Nick at his first step away from the spot.

"Yes, sir?"

"There is one other little matter."

"One other?"

"You came to this spot for a purpose."

Delaney started.

"That's so," he admitted promptly.

"To get rid of something."

"You know everything!"

"I know that."

"It's true, sir."

"Well," inquired Nick, "what was it you threw into the river yonder?"

—

CHAPTER VI.

THE ONE CLEW.

"Yes, sir, I threw something into the slip," said Delaney, making a merit of candor.

"I saw you—what was it?" demanded the detective.

"Jewelry."

"Indeed?"

"A bracelet."

"Whose?"

"His."

"His?"

"The body's."

"Oh!"

Nick understood, but pressed his inquiry closer.

"Be explicit, Delaney," he ordered.

"Well, then, when the undertaker brought that body from the morgue, it had just one shoe and one stocking on."

Nick recalled being interrupted by the undertaker as he was examining the other shoe and stocking for marks of identification.

"When he came to lay the body out at the house, he found a bracelet—maybe I had better say a circlet," proceeded Delaney.

"Well?"

"It was riveted on."

"At the ankle?"

"Yes, but though at one time it must have fitted high up on the limb, it rested at the extremity of the wasted ankle away down on the foot. The undertaker told my wife."

"And she?"

"Ordered him to file it off and give it to her."

"For fear——"

"I don't know her ideas—maybe, dreading that the discovery of the bracelet would cost her two hundred dollars."

"She got the bracelet, did she?"

"She got it. She's a superstitious soul."

"Is she?"

"You can sink the devil, she thinks, but you can't burn him."

"She believes that?"

"She gave me the bracelet."

"With instructions——"

"To throw it in the river."

"Which you did?"

"You say you saw me."

"Go home now, Delaney," ordered Nick, curtly.

The detective watched Delaney disappear, and returned to the spot on the wharf where he had recently stood. Nick marked the same with a splinter of wood, and took a ten-minute scurry about the saloons of the vicinity.

He was accompanied by a ragged specimen of humanity, when he returned, who threw off his tattered coat and kicked off his gaping shoes the moment they struck the planking.

This man was a professional junk diver, water rat—ready to hunt for anything for spoil or money.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"On a line with this board."

"Say, how far out?"

"Not more than ten feet."

"I'll fetch it!"

There was a splash and a disappearance; Nick interestedly watched the methodical and continuous disappearance and reappearance of that frowsy head.

Finally the fellow reached up an arm

—the detective noted a glitter amid a coating of dripping mud.

"Is that it?" asked the water rat.

"Toss it up here."

A round piece of metal fell at Nick's foot—he made a cursory inspection.

"Come ashore," he ordered, slipping the object into his pocket.

He paid the dripping diver, who looked curious, but asked no questions.

Nick hailed the first cab he met, and was driven rapidly to his apartments at the Great Northern Hotel.

He effected a speedy change in his appearance, and examined a card lying on a table.

"Chick has not reported," soliloquized Nick; "he is still on the trail of that hat. Now, then, for the find from the slip."

The object in question was, as Delaney had described, a bracelet or rather a circlet.

It was frail, flat and dull-colored.

"Gold!" said Nick, examining the ends where it had been filed apart—"gold, and bearing an inscription," he added, observing the inside surface of the object.

This had been cut deep and roughly, and although long use and age had considerably worn away the edges of the incisions, the entire original inscription evidently remained.

Scattered so as to run clear around the inner surface of the circlet were the following letters:

"A. T.—W. S.—J. P.—I. W."

Evenly dividing the sets of initials there was a number.

It was: "3."

Nick bestowed long scrutiny and consideration on what was beyond all doubt a clew to the identity of the mysterious dead man.

He was thus engaged when a tap at the door interrupted his examination of the bracelet.

A bell-boy handed Nick a tiny card.

"From Ida," murmured Nick, recognizing the handwriting of his careful and skillful "lady detective."

Nick pocketed the gold circlet and went down to the hotel reception room.

He was greeted by three persons instead of one, as he had expected.

Accompanying Ida was Lester Burton and his beautiful fiancée, Miss Grace

Nordyke—the trio were on their way home from the theatre.

To Nick the devoted lovers owed their present fortune and happiness, and Ida had been Grace's guest for nearly two weeks.

After the greetings, Nick's pretty assistant turned to him particularly.

"I shall report for duty to-morrow," she said.

"Very good," nodded Nick.

"I will be due in New York, I suppose?"

"No, for the present——"

"Chicago?"

"Yes—Chick is here."

"On a case?"

"On several cases of an ordinary character in which I am helping out my old friend, the Chief of Police, but one particularly has just reared its menacing mysterious head."

"You interest me!" said Ida, her eyes glowing with profound fervor and expectancy.

Nick recited to her an outline of the affair in hand, in a low tone rendered indistinct to others by the animated chatter of the two lovers near by.

He quite incidentally drew out the gold circlet.

Nick had not anticipated the sensation its exhibition would arouse—not on the part of Ida, however.

The detective caught a rather sharp ejaculation, and a little surprisedly noticed that Lester Burton was leaning toward him, his eyes fixed on the circlet.

"Excuse me," at once said Burton, "but I was interested."

"That is all right," returned Nick. "In this little piece of jewelry?"

"Yes. May I glance at it?"

"Surely."

It passed into Lester Burton's hand. Nick's glance became riveted on his face as he noted its peculiar expression.

"Well?" he asked.

"I have seen this before, Mr. Carter."

"You have, eh?" inquired Nick, eagerly.

"Yes."

"You have seen this circlet before, you say?"

"Rather, its counterpart."

Nick was aroused at this chance identification.

"Are you sure of that?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes! Number 3. I knew Number 4."

Burton seemed entirely familiar with an object that Nick had anticipated a good deal of trouble in tracing back to its owner and origin.

"I would like you to explain," suggested Nick.

"Why! don't you know all about it?" queried Burton in manifest astonishment.

"I know so little about it that you make me extremely curious—and hopeful."

"Is that so? Well, those last initials——"

"I. W."

"Irus Watt."

Nick gave the speaker a stare.

"Irus Watt, eh?" he murmured.

"Of course—my illustrious half uncle, Dr. Irus Watt, wore the precise counterpart of that circlet."

"Number 4?"

"Exactly."

"The same initials?"

"Size, shape—worn at the ankle, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Everything—except the number."

"This is 3."

"His was 4."

Nick did not speak for a moment. He now understood why young Burton had assumed that he knew all about the circlet.

"I. W.," Irus Watt, Dr. Irus Watt, was a person Nick Carter had reason to remember!

He was the half-uncle of Lester Burton, and it was he and a criminal colleague, one Guild Benham, alias "the Spider," who had attempted to abduct Burton and prove him an embezzler.

The motive had been the attempted destruction of a will favoring Burton as the heir to property Watt had appropriated.

When Nick broke up the combination and restored Burton to his rights, Dr. Irus Watt had disappeared, a baffled, defeated man.

The Spider Nick had run down in Chicago and landed in Sing Sing Penitentiary on a New York charge of burglary.

The expert secret service man supposed he had extirpated the enemies of the

happy couple now at his side, root and branch.

Was a new exposition about to crop out—and in an affair that Nick had not for an instant deemed connected in the remotest way with the brood of schemers he had run down.

"Oh, Lester!" exclaimed Grace, as she caught the name of the scoundrel they had so much reason to remember with dread.

"There is nothing to alarm you," soothed her lover.

"But that man——"

"Dr. Irus Watt——"

"He has appeared again upon the scene!"

"No," corrected Nick, "he has not—but he must, if what you say is true, Mr. Burton!"

Nick gave Ida a look she understood. She slipped to Grace's side, while the detective drew Burton to another part of the room.

"What do you want to know, Mr. Carter?" inquired the latter.

"All you know."

"About that gold circlet?"

"Of course."

"It is just this," said Burton. "I identify it at once, for I saw its counterpart in Dr. Irus Watt's possession."

"When?"

"Over five years ago."

"He was wearing it?"

"He had been wearing it—on the ankle. It had broken apart. I noticed it particularly, because it was a queer thing for a man to wear."

"Just so. Why did he wear it, did he tell?"

"Oh, yes."

"The motive?"

"A sentimental one. Dr. Watt was one of a quartette that combined their interests on a prospecting venture out West in the early days."

"Argonauts, eh?"

"Something of that sort. They succeeded, and in memory of the venture, and of their friendship, upon their return to civilization—becoming enthusiastically sentimental over a convivial celebration—they ordered four circlets, all alike."

"But differently numbered."

"That is it. It was agreed to wear them perpetually."

"And the man who wore this was undoubtedly one of the four?"

"Yes. Who is he? What about him, Mr. Carter? Is Dr. Watt up to some new mischief?"

"I do not yet know; but even coincidence becomes suspicion in the case of a man of his calibre," responded the detective. "You don't happen to know what has become of Watt?"

"I have not the least idea."

"He disappeared after being unmasked and forced to disgorge."

"Utterly."

Nick made neither promises nor explanation to young Burton, and returned to his room as soon as his friends had departed from the hotel.

It was a question with the detective whether this Dr. Irus Watt had anything personally to do with the present case.

In any phase, however, he certainly possessed information of value to Nick.

He could tell what those three remaining sets of initials stood for.

Particularly "J. P."

"J. P." was Number 3 and Dr. Watt could state his identity, possibly tell of his recent whereabouts and history.

"The first step," decided Nick, "is to find Dr. Irus Watt."

"Unless," he was about to add, "Chick succeeds at once in locating the owner of that queer sugar-loaf hat."

At that very instant, Chick unceremoniously opened the door of the room.

"Well?" inquired Nick.

"I have found our man!" promptly announced the detective's assistant.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO NICK CARTERS.

At nine o'clock the next morning Nick and his assistant stood in a doorway opposite a hotel on State street.

"Your man is in there, is he, Chick?" questioned the detective.

"And will soon come out."

"Blondin?"

"That seems to be the name of the mysterious owner of the hat."

"The master?"

"Master of the black art—wizard, conjurer! It was the hint of the hat with the pockets that gave me a cue. I ran down a fellow who makes stage properties. He

had made six such hats in as many years."

"And this one——"

"Which he identified. It took me all yesterday to locate its owner."

"And the man we are waiting for is the person who wore that hat night before last?"

"I won't say that—but he was the original owner of it, at all events."

"Which makes the matter worthy of investigation. Does he live at that hotel?"

"No. He is there on an appointment."

"What kind of an appointment?"

"Professional."

"That is——?"

"Mind-reading."

"Oh!" observed the detective musingly—"a mind reader, is he?"

"Hypnotism—he has run to that lately, posing as the master of a science rather than a performer."

"I see."

"And some scientific gentlemen are about to try an experiment—— But there he is!"

Nick Carter regarded a spectacle unique and remarkable with penetrating glance.

At that moment three men walked out through the public entrance of the hotel.

At their heels was a crowd, but of well-dressed and earnestly interested persons.

The man Chick had pointed out had half of his face obscured.

In other words, he was blindfolded.

Two professional-looking gentlemen led him—one on each side.

At the curb was a carriage. The two guides helped the man Blondin up onto the driver's seat.

They clambered up beside him, examined the blindfold bandage and then, with Blondin in the middle, set the reins in his hands.

Now each held one of his wrists.

"Get up! G'long!" spoke the blindfolded man.

The horses started up. Hundreds, attracted by the strange sight of a blindfolded man driving a carriage through the public streets, stared, discussed, followed in a wondering, excited procession.

Blondin did what scores of his kind had done before—a mere incident to Nick Carter.

An article had been shown to him by a committee of "truth-seekers," an hour previous.

One of them then went and secreted the article at a distance.

Blondin, through his superior mental insight, was to drive, blindfolded, the carriage used by this person, over the same route precisely.

It was wonderful how deftly he evaded collision with other vehicles, going straight to the terminus of his predecessor.

He arrived finally at the great building of the Board of Trade.

Entering it, with the two men still at his side, Blondin led them straight to a certain office, to a desk in the same, opened a drawer and produced—the hidden article.

Nick and Chick had kept up with the procession. They stood at a distance while Blondin, his eyes now released from the bandage, received the congratulations of the committee and gave an interview to several reporters in the group.

"Playing his specialty to advertise a high-priced lecture in some big hall," observed Chick. "We can't lose him now."

"And we must discover if he is the man we want."

"There is where he lives," said Chick, handing a pencilled address to his "chief."

"Was he there last night?"

"He was not, but he is due there to-day."

"You found that out?"

"I did."

"Very well, Chick. He must have a confederate in the crowd; otherwise he couldn't work the trick. Suppose you look for him?"

They separated. Nick did not take up Blondin on a close shadow.

The wizard was now in the hands of the public, and Nick was solicitous for a personal interview.

It was two hours later when Chick reached the vicinity of the place the address of which he had given to Nick Carter.

Chick posted himself opposite the house, the second floor of which he knew to be occupied by the wizard.

He patiently awaited developments,

and at the end of half an hour they materialized.

Out through the front doorway of the house a man came—hurriedly, and rather furtively, he fancied.

Chick started to put himself in the way, in sight of this person, for—at first glimpse—it was the redoubtable Nick Carter himself.

Then suddenly Chick paused with a profound:

"Aha!"

In a flash, he knew what was up—this was Nick Carter, but a false Nick Carter.

"The character impersonator with the ambitious repertoire!" soliloquized Chick.

There could be no doubt that his surmise was correct.

This was one of the fellows whom he had overheard discuss Nick at the Union Depot.

Had he completed the task set for him, or was he just starting out to accomplish it?

"He's a genius!" decided Chick, with something of admiration.

The man's make-up was fine—Chick himself had been deceived for a minute.

He left his post of concealment as the fellow darted down a side street.

"He must be kept in sight at all hazards," decided Chick. "Hello!"

Chick slackened his pace as he turned the corner—and even then he was not twenty feet from the man he was pursuing.

The latter had halted, or rather he had been halted.

By Nick Carter.

Nobody but Chick, or Ida, or Patsy—they of the "charmed special circle"—could have identified a limping, crook-backed specimen of humanity, affecting the Jewish character, as the only and original Nick Carter.

This person had fairly run into the man Chick was shadowing.

He grasped his arm—both arms—with an effusiveness that was volcanic.

"Mr. Carter! my dear Mr. Cater!" he exclaimed.

"Hey! hi! I ain't— I'm in a hurry, you see!"

The pretender tried to back away. Denial died on his lips, however, as he be-

thought himself of the role he was playing.

"In a hurry? So am I!" remarked the real Nick. "Ah, how fortunate! and here is my friend Jacobs!"

"Why, Lowenstein!" chimed in the shrewd Chick in a strong nasal twang, coming forward promptly at the hint direct from Nick, who, always seeing everything, had made him out.

"Mr. Jacobs, my friend, my very dearest friend, Mr. Nick Carter!"

"What!" exclaimed Chick, in profoundest reverence lifting his hat and scraping and bowing—"this is not—"

"The famous Nick Carter!"

"S'sh!" warned the fidgeting, hemmed in impostor—"not so loud!"

"Ah, he is so modest!" remarked the inimitable Nick.

"What—what do you want?" stammered his copy.

"What do I want—when you promised!"

"Did I?"

"Don't you remember?"

"No, I don't—that is to say, yes, yes, yes!"

"You were to come to my store."

"Ah!"

"To tell me if those diamonds I bought were crooked."

"H'm!"

"And you must come now. My dear Mr. Carter, you are slippery! You are a great man, and yet you forget such humble people as poor old Lowenstein!"

"Not—not at all."

"You shall not now. Jacobs, take his arm. It is only a little ways. He shall not escape! One word from Nick Carter is worth a hundred from the best expert. Come on—come on!"

The impostor's face indicated bewilderment. First, he made a break. Then he found himself playfully but firmly pinned on either side.

He pulled his hat over his eyes and hurried his walk. Chick did not know what Nick was up to, but he felt that the episode would have a stimulating and unique ending.

Nick proceeded only three blocks and then he turned into a pawnshop.

The watchful Chick observed him wink at its proprietor.

"Do you see, my dear partner?" Nick

said, addressing the hook-nosed individual behind the counter, "it is my friend I so wish to see, Mr. Nick Carter."

"You don't say—Nick Carter!" exclaimed the pawnbroker.

"I must see him—in our private room."

"Ah! it is well. This way, this way!"

The pawnbroker did not know Nick's game any more than Chick did, but some cue had been given to him in tone or word that made him an immediate ally.

The impostor seemed relieved to get away from the public streets.

Nick led him into a room back of the shop proper. The fellow sank into a chair.

Nick faced him instantly. Instantly, too, he threw down the mask.

With a twist, a turn and a wriggle, he came out from disguise.

The impostor gave him a frozen look.

"The—real—Nick—Carter!" he feebly exclaimed.

"Just that!" nodded the detective coolly, "and now—what have you to say for yourself?"

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CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER SHOWS A WIZARD A NEW TRICK.

For fully two minutes the impostor regarded the accusing, masterful eye of the great detective.

He was a man of resource, else he could not have so perfected his hazardous assumption.

His nerve returned, in a measure. He uttered a short, harsh laugh, shrugged his shoulders, and ran his hand into a pocket.

"Well," he said, "I give in!"

He drew a little green wad out in his palm, and cast it into Nick's lap.

"And give up!" he added.

"I see," observed Nick, before he had unrolled the wad—"your pay?"

"Good guesser!"

"For impersonating me—fifty dollars."

"Eh!"

The impostor looked as if here was a real mind-reader!

"As agreed at the Union Depot meeting."

"Well, how you come to know that

staggers me!" ejaculated the astounded fellow.

"It is fifty dollars," pursued Nick, coolly, straightening out the bill. "Here, take it—— No, I will borrow it for a spell."

"Oh! it's a present, clear. Just cross me off your books, and I'll call it square."

"I couldn't think of that," said Nick—"at least, not until you give up something else."

"And what is that?"

"Information."

The impostor wriggled nervously.

"Not much of that on hand!" he declared.

"No?"

"Decidedly not."

"Think better of it, and see if you can't impart some information that would be useful to me."

"Well, what do you want to know—that you don't know?"

"I know that two nights ago you made a bargain to impersonate me."

"I see that."

"With a fellow having 'a master.'"

"Blondin."

"It is Blondin, then?" said Nick.

"Don't you know that? But, pshaw! you'd find out. Yes, he hired me."

"And now—why?" demanded Nick in a penetrating tone.

"Then you haven't been following me?"

"From——?"

"The Central Police Station."

At this Nick discovered—and Chick, as well—that they had happened upon the impostor too late.

Whatever he had been hired to do, he had already executed.

They had met him after he had given his service, been paid, and possibly permanently dismissed.

"Central Police Station, eh?" repeated Nick, interrogatively.

"Yes," nodded the other.

"You went there?"

"I was sent there."

"By Blondin?"

"Of course."

"Impersonating me?"

"Of course—again."

"And it passed?"

"I passed," confessed the fellow, with unblushing audacity.

"And now, why did you go there?"

"I went there for an old leather tobacco pouch, a pocket knife, a pair of black spectacles, and sixty cents in money."

"Ah!"

Chick looked at Nick—he did not understand what this glib schedule conveyed to his chief, but he knew from Nick's face, tone and manner that it was something unexpected—and yet enlightening.

"They gave the things to you, did they?"

"The custodian did—to Nick Carter, on personal request? Well, I guess so!"

Nick was unmoved by the tribute to his greatness and popularity.

"You know the person to whom they belong?" he asked.

"Yes, Blondin told me."

"And what did Blondin want with them?"

"I don't know."

"Who is 'J. P.' Number 3?"

"Eh?"

"You don't know that, either?"

"Certainly not."

"Why has Blondin and his 'vassal' been carting an unburied body around the country?"

"You've got me again, Mr. Carter."

"Well, I guess you speak the truth."

"I really do."

"You have no inkling of what this fellow Blondin is up to, in inducing you to impersonate me, getting that property out of custody, and the rest of his schemes?"

"Not a hint!"

"Well, I shall lock you up till I am sure of it."

"That is satisfactory."

Nick beckoned Chick out of earshot of the impostor, but still kept his eye on the fellow.

"That property this fellow got for Blondin——" spoke Nick.

"Yes?"

"It belonged to the Spider. When I arrested him, they searched him and took it in charge."

"You remember that?"

"He asked me for it when we got in New York, and I asked him of what use those apparently trifling articles were to him. He said no more, and I thought no more about them."

"And now this fellow Blondin has gone

to trouble, risk and expense to secure them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I cannot conceive, but it shows a manifest connection with the Spider."

"Sure."

"That gold circlet business brings in Dr. Irus Watt."

"Right!"

"And if some big conspiracy isn't under it all, I am no prophet."

"But you are a prophet!"

"We shall see."

"How soon?"

"I shall make a very definite move at once."

"On Blondin?"

"Straight and sharp."

"And this fellow?"

"Take him to the nearest police station and put him down stairs."

"Till you advise farther?"

"Yes."

Nick returned to the impostor's side and told him his fate.

"Satisfactory!" nodded the character impersonator, philosophically.

"As I say, I shall borrow your fifty dollar bill."

"You are welcome."

Nick saw Chick and his prisoner out of the place.

Then he proceeded to restore himself more completely to his ordinary semblance—the identity that the impostor had essayed.

Nick practiced on his walk, manner and tone as he retraced his way toward the house the fellow had just left.

The man had impersonated Nick; tit for tat, the detective determined to profit by his discovery of the imposture.

He boldly rang the bell of the apartments which he knew Blondin to occupy.

A man leaned over the upstairs railing—Nick wondered if this might not be the "vassal."

"What do you want?" he inquired.

"Mr. Blondin."

"What about? Oh, it's you, is it?" exclaimed the other as Nick came a step or two up the stairs.

"It's me."

"Should think you'd deem it best to shed that disguise as quickly as you could."

"Why so?"

"The real article is circulating around."

"Not hereabouts?"

"I wouldn't wonder."

"Well, I want to see Blondin again. Is he busy?"

"He's in a hurry, just the same."

"Hurry—about what?"

"To get away from the city—important call; so, be speedy."

"All right—show me in to him."

"Come along, if you must."

Nick followed the fellow. He led him through two rooms, tapped at a door, opened it, and Nick found himself in an apartment which was in a state of disorder.

The man whom he had seen playing the blindfolded mind-reading trick was packing a valise at a table.

"Hello!" he hailed, with a start, and then a stare of recognition at Nick.

"Yes, it's me."

"What are you after? Thought we'd settled business?"

"We did, but see here—there's your fifty dollars."

Nick placed the bill he had received from the impostor upon the table in front of the wizard.

"Why, what do you mean?" demanded the latter.

"I want to give that to you."

"You do!"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Instruction."

"Eh?"

"I got thinking," declared Nick, "that if I had a few of your cute conjuring tricks to add to my usual accomplishments, I could get up a mighty fetching turn."

"Perhaps, but——"

"Teach me fifty dollars' worth."

"Well—no, I haven't time."

"Not for fifty dollars?"

Blondin looked at his watch.

"Are you quick?" he inquired.

"Well, I'm brisk."

"Then watch me—here's two good ones."

The wizard drew aside a curtain from a shelf holding a stage conjurer's outfit.

He took two cones thence, an apple and a silver ball.

He set two stands, showed nothing un-

der the cones, and balanced the two articles on his finger tips.

"Watch me," he ordered.

"I'm watching," nodded Nick.

"Presto!"

"Yes."

"Change!"

"Yes."

"Look under the cones."

Nick did so.

"The articles are here—one under each. How do you do it? Hold on, though—let me try."

"You!"

"Yes."

Blondin smiled broadly.

"Oh, well! go ahead," he murmured, indulgently.

Nick set the cones for himself. He pranced around, making numerous flourishes with his hands.

He feigned to palm—to make apple and ball disappear.

He made a pass or two.

"Now you look," he said.

The wizard passed between the two tables.

He extended his hands and gingerly lifted the cones by their tapering tops.

"What!" he shouted at one.

"Eh!" he gulped at the second object revealed.

Under one cone was the circlet of gold filed from the ankle of the dead man.

Under the other was the conjurer's own trick hat which he had lost in the mud at the scene of the collision and runaway two nights previous.

CHAPTER IX.

DOWNED!

Nick Carter calmly smiled into the white, startled face turned upon his own.

Quick as lightning the wizard read that something was wrong.

"I see!" he shouted, his glance fairly boring into Nick.

"Do you?" asked the latter, coolly.

"And——"

"How do you like my trick?"

"I go it one better——"

There was a whanging sound.

"Mr. Nick Carter!"

Those words faded away in a tremulous quiver upon the veteran detective's hearing.

He had no consciousness of what had really occurred, except that the wizard, with the alertness that was part of his profession, had swung the arm of a contrivance that played some part in his illusive stage effects.

A spray of gas exuded with a frightful hiss; it seemed to instantly catch and shut off the detective's breath.

Nick Carter staggered blindly, and he fell with a crash.

When the detective rose up again he was helped up. It was dark—hours later.

"It is Chick?" he inquired.

"Yes—it's Chick."

"Get a light."

"Not in this gaseous atmosphere. What have they been doing to you?"

Nick could not tell, and both had to wait to find out.

Left to himself, Nick Carter would have lain insensible where he had fallen until the last vestige of that noxious gas had evaporated.

The doors and windows now opened by Chick soon cleared the apartments, however.

It was safe to light a gas jet now.

Nick read the situation at a single swift glance about the nearly empty rooms.

"Abandoned," he briefly observed.

"Except for some of their heavy truck, yes. They didn't intend to kill you, it seems."

"How did you come to get in, Chick?"

"Why, I hung around for hours, after placing the repertoire fellow in safety."

"You saw nothing of Blondin?"

"I found out a little while ago that he left early in the afternoon."

"And he was going to leave the city!" murmured Nick, thoughtfully.

"He did not do so at once."

"You know that?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"When you get back your natural breath, I have some information to impart."

"I am ready for it now."

"I came into the building here about dusk, nosed around and found an iron letter box below."

"Blondin's?"

"Yes."

"You looked into it?"

"I fished into it."

"Result?"

"A telegram."

"Ah!"

"Saying: 'Shipped at place agreed at nine.'"

"Nine?" exclaimed Nick, consulting his watch—"it is nearly that hour now!"

"Then lose no time—I can talk as we hurry along."

"Where?"

"The quickest route to Haymarket Square."

"What to do?"

"Head off Blondin, possibly. I started for there, but changed my mind, returned here, scented the gas, and—we have lost time."

"Now then!" submitted Nick, as they gained the street, and struck out west at a brisk pace.

"That telegram."

"Well?"

"I investigated it."

"You mean?"

"Ran it back to the delivery office and the sender."

"Who was it?"

"Eugene Rood—Twenty-second street, Medical College."

"Who is he?"

"A student there."

"Who has dealings with Blondin?"

"He sold him a body."

"Another!"

"Yes, another. I faced him down."

"And got the facts out of him?"

"If he told the truth."

"Go on."

"He sold the body. It was applied for, arranged for, by Blondin."

"When?"

"Through his 'vassal'—this noon."

"What do you mean by 'arranged'?"

"That it was to be packed in a box and sent to the rear of Gulder's—a farmer's resort on Haymarket Square."

"I understand."

"That is all. What do they want with another body?"

"To take the place of the one they lost."

"And what did they want that one for?"

"We are probably just about to find out."

The two were very nearly on a run when they reached Haymarket Square.

Nick took the front, Chick the alley.

When the detective came around to the back he saw Chick standing near a large refuse box.

"Not in the place or about it, so far as I can see," reported Nick.

"You mean Blondin?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps it was not his plan to come here personally?"

"Possibly not."

"From what the student told me, a farmer from—— Wait, let me think. Batcham? No, Batterman, up in Niles township, was to receive the box."

"Ah?"

"And deliver it near Glenview."

"Where they would await it."

"Very likely. What are they up to?"

Nick started to investigate the environment of the tavern yard, proper.

He drew to one side as a double wagon started for the gate.

"My friend!" he spoke up to its driver, a burly, phlegmatic German.

"Well?"

"Are you going to Addison?"

"No, I go to Batterman."

"Those bags in that wagon might cover a box?" whispered Chick.

"I think this is our man," observed Nick.

"Shall we join him?"

"Hadly—we will follow."

"Which is the same thing."

"As it is Batterman finally—yes."

Nick and Chick followed the wagon till it struck a straight course north.

Then leaving Chick to trail it on foot, Nick slipped into the first livery stable they came to.

He caught up with his assistant a few minutes later, and their buggy trailed on in the wake of the farm wagon.

It was shortly after nine o'clock when they started.

Two hours later they neared the lights of a small town.

From inquiries Nick had made they knew this to be Glenview. The farmer, however, did not stop. He passed through the town.

The buggy continued its journey to its extreme outskirts.

Nick looked at Chick significantly as he allowed the horse to slow down to a walk.

"Well, Chick," he observed, "this is our destination."

"But that man did not stop?"

"Wrong man."

"Something wrong!"

Just then a rattling sound behind told of the coming of some heavy team down the road they had just traversed.

"It is a farm wagon," said Nick.

He drove the horse into a position so they could completely block the road.

The approaching wagon halted.

"Give me room!" ordered its driver.

"In a minute," said Nick. "See here, my man, I believe you are a farmer."

"Yes."

"Belong at Batterman?"

"I do."

"Just came from Gulden's, Chicago?"

"That's right."

"Carried a box?"

"I did."

"Who for?"

"I don't know."

"What did you do with it?"

"What I was told."

"And that is——"

The man hesitated.

"Well," he said, finally, "I left it where I was directed—at the old quarry storehouse—some tools for the place, maybe—— I don't know. I was paid. Out of the way! I want to catch up with that wagon ahead; some neighbor going my way."

Nick turned his horse's head about.

"The stone quarry is our objective point, it seems," he observed to Chick.

"I hope we shall find the box there," said Chick.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

"We are beaten!" said Chick.

It was half an hour later, nearly midnight, and Nick and his assistant had located and investigated the stone quarry, its storehouse, and the general environment.

Nick nodded a strong negative.

"Not on this fresh scent," he remarked, lighting his dark lantern.

The detective realized that the intricate plot they had been endeavoring to

solve had reached an important focus at this quiet and desolate spot.

The box described by student and farmer had certainly been left on the ricketty platform of the dismantled quarry shed.

Marks showed where it had splintered a plank and had sunk into the mud.

Further marks showed the mingling of various tracks with those of the farmer's horses and the wheels of the wagon.

Nick tried to trace these; Chick watched him explore here and there with a good deal of expectancy.

"That box has not gone far," said Nick.

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"How?"

"Because it was carried away."

"Carried?"

"Yes—by three men."

"You have got it down as fine as that!"

"Even closer."

"Ah!"

"They headed in that direction."

"Toward the town?"

"Exactly."

"Can you trace their course?"

"No, not beyond the muddy spot here; but—come on."

"Leave the buggy here?"

"Yes."

Nick shaded his lantern and took the lead.

Suddenly a far brighter light showed them the way.

"Hello!" hailed Chick, with animation.

"A fire."

"In the town?"

"Yes."

"You don't suppose——"

"Press forward! This Plondin suggests the body-snatcher, fire-bug, anything and everything of that class."

They were crossing a stretch of brush and prairie with an occasional sand rise.

They could not yet make out what was burning, but the sky reddened more and more, and now shouts in the distance were heard.

Nick, in the lead, abruptly dropped to Chick's side.

"Chick," he said, "you can go straight ahead."

"What are you going to do?"

"Arrive just as quickly, perhaps."

"You have some idea——"

"If I have, let me test its merit."

"All right."

Chick dashed ahead. Nick made a lateral swerve from the direct course.

About three hundred feet to the left he had seen a queer light, queerly passing over the ground.

It seemed to be held by some one right down close to the earth, as if its possessor were looking closely for some lost object.

Nick was on the alert for the suspicious and the sinister.

He could not bring himself to allow a single unusual circumstance pass unheeded in the present critical state of affairs.

Nick advanced in the direction of this light, which he decided to be a lantern.

Twice it was lost to view. Then he got nearer, and finally so close that he could make out what he wished to.

Nick came up behind a man half bent over, the lantern held down in front of him, scanning every inch of a two feet sweep before him.

It was scarcely a path, yet grass and earth showed that it had been used more than once recently for that purpose.

Nick could not see the man's face, but he could trace certain trepidation and urgency in his movements.

He proceeded with considerable rapidity, his head bobbing from side to side.

His eyes were so steadfastly fixed on the ground that several times he heedlessly stumbled.

As the shouts in the direction of the fire glare grew in volume, the strange midnight prowler evinced additional nervousness and haste.

He muttered incoherently and irritably, but pressed on.

Nick kept about ten feet in his rear.

Suddenly a shout came from the prowler.

It was a glad chuckling outburst, and he straightened up.

Nick leaped to one side as the man turned about.

He gave his lantern a swing, and it crashed extinguished on a nest of brambles.

Nick Carter repressed a certain show of emotion with some difficulty.

In a faint glare of the lantern he had

caught a flitting glimpse of the face of the man before him.

So vividly did it suggest the face of the man identified as "Martin Delaney," that Nick was momentarily disturbed.

Mingled with that recognition, however, was a vague, peculiar something in the eyes of the man that sent the detective's mind groping into the past.

Nick quickly recovered his mental poise. He drew out his lantern and flashed it.

Like a searchlight in that intense darkness, it enveloped the man in a burst of radiance.

He stood dazzled, dazed; he threw out one hand to beat off the blinding rays, as if they were swords that pierced him.

"Stop! Who is it?" he cried, sharply.

Nick Carter's glance traversed every lineament of the face before him.

"I know!" he breathed softly to himself. "I know you!" Nick said aloud.

"Well, suppose you do. Shut off that light!"

Nick Carter did so.

But he did two other things almost simultaneously.

One action was to grasp out and snatch from the man's hand the parcel he had just found in the path.

The other was to encircle his arm with a firm grip.

Then, pulling the man toward him, the detective spoke his name:

"Dr. Irus Watt!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE INSURANCE SCHEME.

Dr. Irus Watt!

Once Nick Carter had snatched this arch-plotter from a pinnacle of power and fortune unjustly gained.

The detective remembered the glare of venom and hate of that moment—it was reproduced now.

Yet suddenly the hard, sullen face, in the dark-lantern glow broke to abject fear.

"Carter!" gasped the doctor.

"I am on hand," coolly nodded the detective.

"Nick Carter again."

"Nick Carter always, so long as you pursue the path that will lead you straight and fast to——"

"The gallows! Here's a bid for it!" shouted Watt, insanely.

No form stood before him, however, nor prostrate at his feet in the flash of his quick revolver.

From behind there came a surprise that taught the would-be murderer how spry Nick Carter could be on occasions.

An iron hand brought the miscreant's wrists to a junction, and cold steel passed about them and set with a click.

Nick lingered and pondered for a moment.

"What is that fire?" he demanded.

Watt gritted his teeth in reply; he would not speak.

The detective pushed him in the direction of his waiting horse and vehicle.

Nick hurried his captive toward the built-up part of the town.

Everybody was awake, and he found no difficulty therefore in locating the marshal; Dr. Irus Watt was put promptly under lock and key.

The mention of Nick's name had made the marshal a willing ally and host.

Nick made no explanation as to his prisoner—he rather sought information, as with the official they left the little station house.

"What is the fire?" he inquired.

"Old John Prindle's house."

"Ah!" murmured Nick softly to himself.

The initials of that name instantly struck the attention of the detective.

"'J. P.,' Number 3?" he soliloquized. "Coincidence, or——"

"Been a sick and secluded hermit for a year or more," explained the marshal. "Kind of helpless, too, and if no one got to the fire in time——"

"He's burned up!" declared an excited passerby.

"Is that so?" shuddered the marshal.

Nick held his own counsel. He left the marshal's side and mixed with a crowd about a building well-nigh consumed.

He came across Chick rambling among the sheds at the rear of the place.

Chick instantly pointed to a large box lying beside a heap of hay.

"That arrived to-night," he declared.

"Yes," nodded Nick, "that is the box we were following."

"What's the connection?"

"With the fire?"

"Then there is one?"

"I have my theory."

"Let me hear it, won't you?"

"In the presence of the man who can tell us all about it, yes."

"What do you mean" questioned Chick, with a quick look.

"Dr. Irus Watt."

"You haven't got him!"

"I have got him."

If the wizard and his accomplices had been in the neighborhood, they had abandoned it, for Chick had been able to discover no trace of them.

Nick entered the apartment where Dr. Watt was confined as prisoner, prepared for a big wordy battle.

The schemer was sulky and obstinate. Nick produced lights and set chairs, as if willing to begin an all-night seance.

"Doctor," he said, "they have dragged a crisped body out of that burning house, and it is supposed to be that of one John Prindle."

Watt regarded Nick keenly out of the corner of his eye.

"But I," proceeded Nick, "have in a vault in Chicago the body of the real John Prindle."

Watts' nerve broke—he shook palpably.

"Prindle's life was insured for ten thousand dollars. He had no relatives. He had some friends or pretended friends. You were Number 4."

Watt went all to pieces. He saw that Nick knew everything.

He looked up, desperate.

"You, Nick Carter!" he growled—"tell two things, and I will tell all."

"Go ahead."

"Where is Blondin?"

"We have Blondin to find yet."

"Where is the little package you took away from me?"

Nick produced it.

"Can I have it?"

"After I have examined it."

This Nick proceeded to do.

"Why!" exclaimed Chick, as the paper wrappings were removed, "it is the stuff described by the fellow who impersonated you."

"Yes," said Nick, "the Spider's property from the public custodian."

Nick had regarded these carelessly when first taken from the Spider.

Now he naturally examined them with close attention—particularly the tobacco pouch.

As he turned this inside out, he observed that its double lining was cut, as if recently.

"I think I understand," he observed—"the Spider had some paper secreted——"

Nick paused, for Watt began to manifest a sudden emotion.

As Nick showed, by manipulating the pouch, that if it had once secreted something it no longer did so, Watt shouted wildly.

"The traitor! the thief!"

"Ah! to whom do you refer?" inquired Nick.

"You have not tampered with that package since you took it from me?"

"It is just as I received it."

"Then—— Oh, it is my luck!" raved Watt; "trapped by you, robbed by that scoundrel Blondin!"

"There was a paper in here, you fancy?" inquired Nick.

"I may as well tell—there was."

"Of the Spider's?"

"His receipt from a 'fence,' for plunder accumulated through years. And Blondin pretended he had lost it! Lost it! Yes, after deceiving his confederates and he has got away! Carter—find him!"

"I shall find him," promised Nick.

"And I'll let out the facts."

"Now?"

"Yes, give him his share—he deserves it! Listen!"

Dr. Irus Watt "confessed."

Nick would have certainly gleaned the facts in the course of investigation; Watt probably realized this, and hoped to make a point by anticipating.

John Prindle was one of the quartette of "argonauts."

Watt, driven from Chicago by Nick, had cast about him for any means of making a stake.

He had found Prindle at Glenview, dying, with his life insured for ten thousand dollars.

He officiated as nurse, friend of the recluse, but the next day Prindle died on his hands.

Then Watt found himself in something of a fix.

Prindle had lapsed on a premium payment to the insurance company.

The only way of adjusting this was to have an agent come down, examine, report and receive the deferred premium.

Watt set up a scheme with Blondin. The latter took the dead body away. Watt, who somewhat resembled Prindle in build and face, assumed the invalid's place in bed.

The agent was deceived, believing him to be the real Prindle, and the premium matter was fixed up sooner than the schemers had hoped.

The idea now was to have the house burned down with Prindle apparently within it.

A body was necessary; Blondin had provided it.

Watt had a forged paper whereby Prindle had transferred his insurance benefits to him.

This was the plot which Nick Carter had nipped—not in the bud, but fairly at the moment of its full, promising fruition.

"Run down!"

"Yes, Chick—our man—our men, rather—are in that room."

During two days after the fire at Glenview Nick had been busy straightening out the loose ends of the Watt-Blondin plot.

He had the insurance company to see, the character impersonator and the Delaneys to put on their proper footing, and Lester Burton to consult regarding his imprisoned half-uncle.

The skilled secret service man had the main mover in the attempted insurance fraud, Blondin, in his mind's eye all the time, however.

Now, Chick with him, he had run the fellow to earth in the suburban hotel they had just entered.

"Has he been here since the fire?" inquired Chick.

"Yes—he ran for this cover at once."

"Two men with him, you say?"

"Two of his friends—your 'vassal' fellow, and some other accomplice."

"Then it is probable that Blondin has not yet set about utilizing the paper he cut out of the Spider's tobacco pouch?"

"It is not likely. Wait here till I signal."

"Very well."

Nick advanced lightly down a corridor, reaching a door slightly ajar.

"What is this?" he instantly exclaimed.

Nick witnessed a peculiar, a startling scene.

A table was visible, at which three men had apparently just been seated, eating and drinking.

Across it, overcome by wine, lay a man, his head resting on his arms.

Near him was a person whom the detective recognized as the "vassal" who had admitted him to the city quarters of the wizard.

In his hand he held a knife, and on the door his eyes were fixed.

A glassy yet maniacal expression haunted their depths.

Making passes toward him, and near to the peering, engrossed detective was "the master"—Blondin.

"The vampire!" muttered Nick Carter.

The experienced detective read the oracle in a flash.

Blondin had his steely eyes riveted on his "vassal."

He was making passes—he had hypnotized his victim.

He was suggesting crime, for, swaying, approaching nearer and nearer, the man under the mesmeric spell was moving that hand, that knife toward an unconscious victim.

Nick Carter had already shown the wizard a trick not in his repertoire.

Nick Carter now added a climax performance.

His hand went inside his coat, where he kept a pair of handcuffs of his own invention.

They were provided with a long chain, which wound and unwound, set and unset automatically, so that a prisoner could be manacled from any direction, and in any position.

"Break the spell!" commanded the detective sharply.

As he spoke he pushed open the door.

With a clang, the knife fell from the grasp of the disenthralled "vassal."

With a snap, the handcuffs encircled the wrist of the "master," the wizard.

Chick came upon the scene, attracted by the furious ravings of the wizard.

"Search him," said Nick, briefly.

"This must be the Spider's document?" suggested Chick, ferreting out a little folded slip from a secret pocket.

Nick barely inspected it.

"Right, Chick!" he announced.

Blondin had counted on getting rid of two persons aware of his crimes through "the hypnotic impulse."

He could seal the lips of one and send the other to the gallows by simply exerting his dangerous power.

Then he calculated on pursuing his schemes with a free field.

The plunder store at the "fence" would then be all his—he need divide with nobody.

It was Nick Carter himself, instead of the wizard, who presented the receipt the next day and turned over to the Chicago Police Department the splendid spoil of a long career of thieving and crime.

[THE END.]

The next number of the Nick Carter Weekly will contain "Nick Carter's Handsome Prisoner; or, How Her Smiles Failed to Fascinate Him," by the Author of Nick Carter.

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